

Substance Abuse

About 4% of people over 65 struggle with substance abuse, most often involving alcohol, prescription drugs, or over-the-counter medications.



Reasons for Abuse

Older adults with substance abuse issues generally fall into two categories: those with a long history of substance use and those who begin after age 65. **Late-onset substance use** may start to **cope with age-related stressors**, such as health challenges, financial changes, grief, loneliness, boredom, chronic pain, or sleep disturbances.

Signs

Signs and symptoms of substance abuse in older adults **will vary depending on what substance is being used**. Look for loss of interest in activities, depression and anxiety, hostility, confusion, losing prescriptions, changing doctors, changes in hygiene, changes in appearance, sleeping more than often, and/or being secretive.

Confronting the Problem

When intervention is needed, involve only one or two trusted relatives or friends. Older adults may **feel guilt or shame** about "losing control" later in life, so approach the conversation with care. Be honest about the changes you've observed and take time to **understand their reasons** for substance use.

Treatment Options

Substance abuse treatment for older adults is similar to treatments for younger people, including counseling, medication-assisted therapy, and support groups. **Age-specific groups** can be helpful, as they often adjust the pace, repeat important information, or speak louder so everyone can participate and benefit.

Holistic Support

Incorporating **holistic approaches** into substance abuse treatment:

- **Mindfulness meditation**, **yoga**, and **acupuncture** can help reduce stress and manage cravings.
- **Nutrition therapy** supports physical health and recovery.
- **Art** and **music therapy** provide creative and therapeutic outlets for healing.